

\*Use this format as a family, a couple, or with a small group.

## Message Summary

The people of God have moved into the Promised Land. But the nation of Israel is hardly living in God's true kingdom, because sin still reigns in their hearts. The problem is actually two-fold. First, they have failed to completely drive out the pagans as they were told, and that idolatrous influence is corrupting people right and left. Second, the generations that followed those leading the conquest have not been taught to know and follow God. As a result, they are without clear direction and therefore floundering spiritually. So in the book of Judges a vicious cycle repeats itself: Israel engages in sustained disobedience; God removes his favor and the people are oppressed by some other nation; the people cry out in repentance; and God raises up a leader to bring them deliverance. The happy ending to each cycle is unfortunately temporary, and Israel lives a third of these 330 years under oppression by surrounding nations. There are important spiritual parallels for us, since we also must struggle to put aside the sinful influences of the world "out there" and the sin-nature "in here". Only through repentance and deliverance can we be restored to right fellowship with God. The good news is that just as God welcomed them back as soon as they repented, he stands ready to do the same for us.

## Opening Question

If you had to move to a very different culture, what do you think you would miss most about life, as you know it now?

## Discussion Questions

Note: All page numbers below are from *The Story*, 2008 edition. Additional group discussion questions for this chapter can be found on page 392-3.

1. Human cultures across the globe can have God-honoring, neutral or very sinful aspects. The hardest thing to do is be unbiased about the faults of our own culture because we are so immersed in it. Without over-analyzing, come up with at least 5 things that fit in each of those three categories (15 total) for the culture you live in. Share at least two from each category with members of your discussion group. Does everyone agree with what should be in each category or is most important? How can we avoid conforming too much to the culture around us—and at the same time steer clear of turning our criticisms into judgment (rather than dealing with the log in our own eye)?
2. The sin most commonly committed in the book of Judges is idolatry. But idolatry in that era almost always included sexual promiscuity as "worship". What comparisons can you make to sex in that culture and how sex is misused and "idolatrous" in our own culture? In what ways does sex or romantic attention turn into idols for you?
3. God chose to withhold his protection as a way to discipline the Israelites and test them (page 86 or Judges 2:20-23). Does God always do that? Explain your answer, and use an illustration from your own life.
4. God uses Israel to teach the surrounding nations about his justice and grace. He disciplines the people according to the law, and yet powerfully intervenes when they cry for help. Imagine that God put you in people's lives to do precisely the same thing: to show them through your experiences what he is like. Describe what someone watching your life in recent weeks would conclude about God. What adjustments might you make to allow him to show himself more clearly?
5. One of the bright spots in this era of the Judges (as it is also called) is the life of Deborah (page 87 or Judges 4-5). What role did she play according to the story? Knowing it was primarily a patriarchal society, what observations can you make about what God might have been teaching them about his ideal plan for men and women and leadership?
6. Another bright spot is Gideon. God deliberately chose a "nobody" from an unlikely family and clan to lead the people. God then trimmed his army from 32,000 men to 300. What reason does God give for doing that (page 90 or Judges 7:2)? In light of what God says, what do you think is the difference between knowing and using your gifts/talents/abilities versus boasting about or relying on them?
7. Samson has been called "The World's Weakest Strong Man". His physical strength is obvious, but how is he morally weak (pages 93-97 or Judges 14-16)? What cautions from his life story do you take away for yourself?
8. Every Christian has to admit that even though we claim to be Christ-followers, sin is still present. Yet if there is no difference in our attitude toward and frequency in sinning, aren't we hypocrites? What do the sin-cycles in the book of Judges and the sin-cycles in our lives have in common? What are the differences?

As a final question, you can ask group members who did the personal reflection assignment if there is anything from that material they would like to share or ask the group about. Close in prayer.